

# San Luis Obispo County







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**S**AN LUIS OBISPO County's northern coast is a pristine landscape of forested mountains carved by perennial streams that wind their way to the sea across grassy marine terraces. Prominent headlands at Ragged Point, Point Sierra Nevada, and Point Piedras Blancas separate long stretches of rocky coast where seabirds nest on offshore rocks, shorebirds forage along the water's edge, and passing whales or playful otters can frequently be seen beyond the surf line. Morro Bay, really an estuary teeming with wildlife that is sheltered from the ocean by a four-mile-long sand spit, lies at the midpoint of the San Luis Obispo County coast. South of Morro Bay the San Luis Mountains, part of the southern Coast Ranges, form a barrier to travel between the bay and the southern county coast. In these mountains, Montaña de Oro State Park provides access to a largely undisturbed landscape with spring wildflower displays, rare geologic formations, and remote canyons where the Chumash indigenous people once walked. The coast highway joins the shoreline again at San Luis Obispo Bay. Continuing south, the coast broadens into a wide plain edged with sandy beaches and undulating dunes

from Pismo Beach to the mouth of the Santa Maria River.

The coast of San Luis Obispo County offers a collection of small towns with all the traditional seacoast features, from fishing boats and fishing piers in the harbor to wide, sandy beaches. Cambria features antique shops and miles of dark sand pocket beaches, while Cayucos has the informal charm of the traditional beach community, centered on its wooden pier. The municipality of Morro Bay is of modest size, but the town's efforts to make its waterfront accessible to visitors are dramatically apparent. Many recreational options are contained in a few blocks along Embarcadero Rd., within view of imposing Morro Rock. The Morro Bay Winter Bird Festival is held annually in mid-January, when migratory birds are in abundance around the Morro Bay Estuary; call: 805-772-4467. Surfing or kiteboarding on Estero Bay offer recreational sport to the participants and good viewing for those who choose a beach towel on the sand over the rigors of the waves. Pismo Beach has an old-time, pier-town feel, and the enormously long sweep of sand fronting the community hosts beach activities of every sort.

For visitor information, contact:

San Luis Obispo County Visitors and Conference Bureau, 805-541-8000.

San Simeon Chamber of Commerce, 805-927-3500.

Cambria Chamber of Commerce, 805-927-3624.

Cayucos Chamber of Commerce, 805-995-1200.

Morro Bay Visitors Center & Chamber of Commerce, 805-772-4467.

Los Osos/Baywood Park Visitors Center, 805-528-4884.

Pismo Beach Visitors Information Center, 805-773-4382.

Grover Beach Chamber of Commerce, 805-489-9091.

Oceano Chamber of Commerce, 805-489-2252.

South County Area Transit serves coastal locations in Shell Beach, Pismo Beach, Grover Beach, and Oceano; call: 805-781-4472.





Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument

Ragged Point to  
Hearst Castle



	Sandy Beach	Rocky Shore	Trail	Visitor Center	Campground	Wildlife Viewing	Fishing or Boating	Facilities for Disabled	Food and Drink	Restrooms	Parking	Fee
Ragged Point Trail and Overlook	•	•	•						•	•	•	
Piedras Blancas Motel	•	•					•			•	•	
Point Piedras Blancas		•										
Elephant Seal Viewing Area	•	•			•					•		
Vista Points		•			•					•		
Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument			•				•		•	•	•	•

**RAGGED POINT TRAIL AND OVERLOOK:** *W. of Hwy. One, 15 mi. N. of San Simeon.* Two miles north of Ragged Point, the Ragged Point Inn sits on a level grassy terrace, 300 feet above sea level. Along the bluff edge there are dramatic views of the Big Sur Coast, including the sheer-sided cliffs that plunge down to the surf zone, north of the inn. Behind the restaurant, a very steep, switchbacked trail leads down the north face of the bluff, past a waterfall, to a small sandy beach. The trail

and overlook are privately managed; for information, call: 805-927-4502.

**PIEDRAS BLANCAS MOTEL:** *W. of Hwy. One, 7.3 mi. N. of San Simeon.* The old motel is closed, but beach access is available under interim property management by the Trust for Public Land. The high bluff edge is eroding, but walk 300 yards south of the motel buildings to where the bluff is lower to descend to the sandy beach. Long-range plans



Coast near Ragged Point

From Ragged Point to San Simeon Bay, the Hearst Ranch has dominated the northern San Luis Obispo County coast since the 1860s, when George W. Hearst began to assemble his mammoth land holdings. Under a complex land conservation agreement that became effective in 2005, some 13 miles of Hearst Ranch coastline have changed from private to public ownership. The agreement allowed the State of California to take title to nearly 1,000 acres of land along Hwy. One, including 13 sandy beaches. Additional Hearst Ranch land along Hwy. One will remain under private ownership but will be subject to state control, in order to provide an alignment for completion of the California Coastal Trail through the entire length of the Hearst Ranch. The coastline now under state ownership has become part of San Simeon State Park. Before the newly acquired coastal lands can be opened to public use, however, the California Department of Parks and Recreation must prepare public access and resource management plans. Meanwhile, existing public use will continue of pull-outs and vista points along Hwy. One, maintained by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans).

As part of the conservation agreement, a permanent easement has been created to allow Caltrans to realign Hwy. One eastward at four locations in the Hearst Ranch, to address continuing coastal erosion problems. The conservation easement also protects existing views of the coast from Hearst Castle and along Hwy. One by restricting future construction. Under the conservation agreement, the land inland of Hwy. One will remain privately owned and not open to the public, except for lands already available for public use, such as Hearst Castle.

The long-standing agricultural and livestock operations will continue inland of Hwy. One, but approximately 80,000 acres of the Hearst Ranch, the largest privately owned working cattle ranch along the coast of California, will come under a conservation easement designed to protect natural and scenic values of the land.

The area subject to the conservation easement adjoins the Los Padres National Forest and includes a wide range of habitat communities, including coastal scrub, chaparral, coast live oak, ponderosa pine forest, riparian, and wetland habitats.

call for the site to be transferred to the State Parks Department; call: 805-927-2020.

**POINT PIEDRAS BLANCAS:** *W. of Hwy. One, 6 mi. N. of San Simeon.* In 1864 a lookout was built on the point to alert whalers at nearby San Simeon of approaching leviathans during their annual migration. Three centuries earlier, explorer Cabrillo had noted the guano-covered rocks near the point on his voyage up the California coast in 1542 and had called them *piedras blancas*, or “white rocks.” The rocks at the point are a California sea lion and harbor seal hauling-out ground, as well as a rookery for Brandt’s cormorants.

A lighthouse, originally 115 feet tall, was built on the point starting in 1874 and equipped with a first-order Fresnel lens. (A first-order lens is the largest of seven sizes of lenses in typical use in the 19th century.) When it was built, the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse was the only light between Point Pinos in Monterey County and Point Conception in Santa Barbara County. Originally one of California’s few tall lighthouses with a classic silhouette, the Piedras Blancas Lighthouse suffered storm damage in 1949 that resulted in removal of the lantern room at the top of the tower. The original lens and lantern can now be viewed at Pine-



orado Park on Main St. in Cambria. The Piedras Blancas light remains in operation, with a lens installed in 2002. The lighthouse is now owned by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and is open only for limited public tours; for information, call: 805-927-2968. Tour reservations are handled by the National Geographic Hearst Castle Theater; call: 805-927-6811.

**ELEPHANT SEAL VIEWING AREA:** *Off Hwy. One, 4.7 mi. N. of San Simeon.* Elephant seals can be seen near Point Piedras Blancas nearly year-round. Caltrans has provided a parking area with interpretive panels at the Elephant Seal Viewing Area, now managed by the California Department of Parks and Recreation. The Friends of the Elephant

Seal, a nonprofit group, organizes a docent program that assists visitors. Volunteers are on site daily, except during September, from 10 AM to 4 PM. The docents, who wear blue jackets, answer questions and provide information about the seals. The group also maintains a visitor center at the Plaza del Cavalier in San Simeon, staffed by volunteers and open variable hours; call: 805-924-1628.

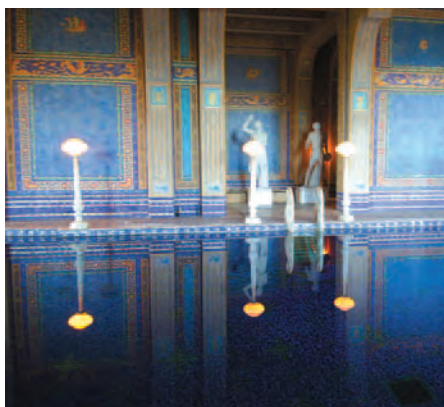
**VISTA POINTS:** *Along Hwy. One, 5 mi. and 3.5 mi. N. of San Simeon.* Two vista points overlooking beaches and rocky shore are located on the west side of Hwy. One, north of San Simeon. The more northerly of the two vista points has paved parking and is located just north of the Elephant Seal Viewing Area. No facilities.



Elephant seals



Neptune Pool, Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument



Roman Pool, Hearst San Simeon State Historical Monument

**HEARST SAN SIMEON STATE HISTORICAL MONUMENT:** *E. of Hwy. One on Hearst Castle Rd., San Simeon.* Formerly William R. Hearst's private estate, now open to the public as a State Historical Monument located within the Hearst Ranch holdings. Tours of the monument start at the Hearst Castle Visitor Center, located on Hwy. One. The visitor center has exhibits, a gift shop, food service, and the National Geographic Hearst Castle Theater, where films about Hearst Castle screen continuously; for showtimes, call: 805-927-6811. Visitors to the Castle travel by bus up the hill, and all tours involve a half-mile walk and considerable stair climbing. For tour tickets and advance reservations, which are highly recommended, call: 1-800-444-4445. Fee for tours. For information on accommodations for visitors with mobility limitations, call: 1-800-777-0369.



William Randolph Hearst was a newspaper tycoon known for publishing sensational headlines, opinionated coverage, and accounts that were not necessarily completely accurate. "The Chief" also published popular magazines, pioneered the syndication of comic strips and the production of newsreels, and made movies featuring lavish costumes and sets. He was presumed to be the inspiration for the title character in the film *Citizen Kane*. He involved himself in national politics, and he generated controversy by printing stories that pressured President William McKinley to launch the Spanish-American War in 1898, apparently to increase sales of his newspapers.

William Randolph Hearst's father was mining magnate and U.S. Senator George Hearst, from whom William got his first newspaper, as well as a love for picnicking and camping on the family's extensive land holdings. His mother was Phoebe Apperson Hearst, a philanthropist and lover of culture, through whom he met Julia Morgan, the renowned architect he hired to design and manage the construction of his castle on the 250,000-acre family ranch in San Simeon.

Julia Morgan was one of the first women to earn a civil engineering degree from the University of California at Berkeley, the first woman admitted to the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and the first woman to receive a California architect's license (in 1904). She was visionary, hard working, detail-oriented, and willing to accommodate Hearst's collaboration in designing (and often redesigning) his estate on *La Cuesta Encantada*, "the Enchanted Hill."

The Hearst Castle compound includes a palace-like house, the *Casa Grande*, built in the Mediterranean Revival style, accompanied by three guesthouses on an estate of 127 acres of gardens, terraces, pools, and walkways. The main house alone contains 38 bedrooms and 41 bathrooms. Hearst wanted to live in a building that would hold the countless art pieces he collected, and indeed his home is full of valuable paintings and furniture, Greek vases, medieval tapestries, and antique silver.

The grounds are decorated with Greek, Roman, and Egyptian artifacts. His castle integrates art into its very structure as well: new construction accompanies antique ceilings, fireplaces, and mantels he collected from old castles; Persian tiles; ancient mosaics; and windows, columns, doors, and statues from centuries-old buildings in Europe.

Hearst and his companion, movie actress Marion Davies, regularly hosted lively company, including Charlie Chaplin, Cary Grant, Carole Lombard, Charles Lindbergh, President Calvin Coolidge, and many others who were their guests at lavish costume parties and other social occasions.

The guests ate dinner in the grand dining hall that seated more than 60 persons and afterward watched films in the private movie theater. Activities included admiring the animals in the world's largest private zoo, riding horses, playing tennis, and swimming in one of two magnificent pools. Hearst liked to join in the fun when he could take a break from running his 28 newspapers, 18 magazines, 8 radio stations, 2 film companies, and 2 news services.

## Northern Elephant Seals

THE MAMMALIAN ORDER *Pinnipedia* (meaning “feather feet”) includes eared seals—fur seals and sea lions—and earless, or true seals—harbor seals and elephant seals. Pinnipeds are insulated from the cold by fur, a thick hide, and a fat layer; their limbs have evolved into flippers. Sea lions and fur seals have small external ears, and their hind flippers can turn forward; this is useful on land where they are able to move about quite efficiently. California sea lions are the “seals” seen in circus shows.

Harbor seals and elephant seals cannot turn their hind flippers forward, and are therefore less mobile on land, able only to wriggle along on their bellies. Unlike sea lions and fur seals, true seals float in the water vertically, with their heads sticking out. When ready to submerge, they sink straight down, tail first, rather than diving forward.

Northern elephant seals (*Mirounga angustirostris*) are the largest of the true seals; females are up to 12 feet long, weighing 900 to 1,800 pounds, while males reach 16 feet in length and weigh up to 5,000 pounds. Pups, once weaned, can weigh up to 500 pounds. Males have large, bulbous snouts and rough, dry-looking skin. They can dive to tremendous depths in the ocean, on average between 1,000 and 2,000 feet, occasionally reaching nearly a mile below the surface. Elephant seals feed on fish, squid, and octopus. The seals in turn are prey for white sharks and for orcas, also called killer whales.

Elephant seal social structure is male-dominant; however, rather than defending territories as sea lions and fur seals do, elephant seal males establish a dominance hierarchy among themselves through brief but violent battles. The top-ranking male mates with most females. The breeding season of these animals is from December to March.

Once numerous in the Pacific Ocean, elephant seals were slaughtered in large numbers during the 19th century for their oil-rich blubber. At the low point of their population, only a few dozen elephant seals remained on Guadalupe Island off Baja California.



Elephant seal haul-out near Point Piedras Blancas





Female elephant seal and pup

During the 20th century, the number of elephant seals grew, and the animals established rookeries on the Channel Islands, Año Nuevo Island in San Mateo County, and Southeast Farallon Island off San Francisco. Later, breeding colonies appeared on the mainland. Since 1990, northern elephant seals have established a large breeding colony near Point Piedras Blancas. At first, the colony occupied a small cove near the light-house at Point Piedras Blancas. The colony has grown rapidly, both in numbers and in territory, which has expanded to additional beaches along Hwy. One. In 1995, 600 pups were born near Point Piedras Blancas, and the following year, there were 1,000 new pups. In 2005, 3,500 pups were born, and the number of elephant seals at Point Piedras Blancas was estimated at about 14,000, although not all of them are present at any one time. The largest colonies of elephant seals are found at San Nicolas and San Miguel Islands; the total population of the species is estimated at 100,000.

Females give birth from the end of December through February. After pups are weaned, the mothers depart, leaving their offspring to teach themselves how to swim. Adult males also leave the land, spending the next few months feeding at sea. During the spring and summer, adults and juveniles of both sexes return for a month or so to the beaches to molt. After molting, the elephant seals once again take to the ocean to feed. In the fall, the seals haul out on the shore, first the youngest, followed by the mature males at the end of November and females ready to give birth in mid-December. An individual female elephant seal spends a total of two months per year on land, while a male spends four months on land. Elephant seals can be seen along the shore nearly year-round.

When male elephant seals are fighting for dominance, they can move surprisingly fast. Visitors do not want to find themselves in the path of one of these animals that weighs as much as a pickup truck. Elephant seals are protected by law; it is both illegal and dangerous to approach or harass the animals. For more information about the seals, contact the Friends of the Elephant Seal; call: 805-924-1628.